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THE ENGLAND OF OUR FOREFATHERS

THERE is one period of English history that is to us Americans of more significance than all the centuries which preceded and have followed it; for it is the pit from which our nation was dugged and the rock from which it was hewn. It covers a part of the sixteenth century and the whole of the seventeenth, but its earliest portion is of the greater importance. Some eighty years, say from 1580 to 1660, covered the adult life of the whole body of early emigrants from England to New England, Virginia, and Maryland. Every man who came from England to America to build up the colonies was born, or at least grew to maturity, and gained his impressions, characteristics, and early experiences in England in those years. How much do we really know about England during that period? How clear and how adequate is the knowledge we can obtain from accessible historical works of life in England at the time our earliest American forefathers lived in it and were formed by it? These first settlers not only were raised under English conditions; they brought over with them the ideas and training they had gained at home, and they established these English institutions in America. Where can we turn to find what the English institutions of the time were?

This paper is intended as in a certain sense an answer to these questions. It is intended to indicate, first, what has been done and what still needs to be done in the study of English history during the two generations between 1580 and 1660; secondly, what materials for performing the remaining work exist; and thirdly, how far these materials are accessible.

In examining what is already done we turn in the first place naturally to the narrative history of the period, the account of its events. Curiously enough, this is nowhere very minutely and familiarly given. That part of the period which falls within the reign of Elizabeth has suffered from the length of her reign and from the relatively more exciting character of its earlier years. Froude, it is true, called his work a *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Death of Elisabeth*; but with his instinct for the picturesque he brings his work to an end with the defeat of the Armada, in 1588, fifteen years short of his previously announced

date of conclusion. He may have grown weary in well—or ill doing, or he may have had a justifiable feeling that twelve volumes are quite as many as any one man should write on any one subject; but what he says is, "Chess-players, when they have brought their game to a point at which the result can be foreseen with certainty, regard their contest as ended, and sweep the pieces from the board."¹ So, looking upon the history of sixteenth-century England as a sort of drama of the Reformation, after the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and the defeat of the first great attempt to avenge her death, he considers the play ended, and brings it to a close which is far more dramatic than either scholarly or historically justifiable. Nor have others who preceded or have followed Froude given an appreciably fuller account of the last fifteen years of Elizabeth's reign. An impression has grown up that it was in some sense a triumphant period, a time of well-earned rest from earlier labors, but all details are wanting. The contrary is really the case: the queen outlived her ability and her popularity; the country groaned and muttered under the enormous exactions and taxation; repeated Spanish armadas terrified the towns and the seaboard; Ireland, as so often before and since, just failed to shake off the English incubus; golden opportunities to crush England's great Spanish rival were lost by vacillation and mismanagement—but of all these, too, details are still wanting.

With the accession of James I., we come into the light of the great work of Gardiner. Solid learning, scholarly accuracy, and an admirable freedom from partizanship mark a history that extends in time well beyond the period of early American settlement and falls but little short of the limit he had planned for it. Yet Gardiner's work is merely political; and consists besides, if carefully examined, rather of a series of descriptions of a few successive great events or movements than of a continuous, well-balanced narrative. His historical writing appeared first as a series of detailed studies: *Prince Charles and the Spanish Marriage* (1869), *England under Buckingham* (1875), and others; and the recasting of it into a continuous form did not materially alter its character. It cannot be said that we have a well-rounded and lifelike account of the period of the early Stuarts, even from Gardiner. Nor is this want supplied by other narratives, nor by the many excellent biographies of the men of the time that have appeared. A clear, continuous, and inclusive account of the occurrences of English history during the period referred to is certainly a desideratum.

¹ Volume XII. (ed. of 1856-1870), 530.

Turning to the different aspects of history, it might seem at first thought that the political, the religious, and the intellectual conditions of the time at least were thoroughly familiar. The first half of the seventeenth century was a period of the first importance in political and constitutional history, and it has naturally therefore received something approaching adequate discussion. Hallam, Gardiner, Gneist, Ranke, Macaulay, and others have analyzed the theories and contentions of the respective sides of the disputes between king and Parliament, and traced their history till the contentions were put to the arbitrament of war and the theories to the test of practice. A great number of the documents of the period have been made accessible in the collections of Prothero and Gardiner. Some of the most important have been made familiar even to our school-children by their publication in such series as the *Old South Leaflets*, *American History Leaflets*, and *Liberty Documents*.

Yet a somewhat closer examination of this literature discloses the fact that it is practically entirely occupied with contentious matters. But what do we know concerning the normal, uncontested routine of government? What were the ordinary rights and duties of the king, aside from disputed questions of high prerogative? How was Parliament actually elected and organized; and how was it occupied when not engaged in the assertion of its "ancient and undoubted privileges"? A careful search through the books I have named will be rewarded with but little information on these points. Yet these questions are really more fundamentally important for the study of American institutions than the great disputes which tore England into factions. Political disputes had much to do with the fact of emigration, and with the selection of those who emigrated; but when the dissatisfied element had once left England, they left, to a great extent, these disputes behind them. What they took with them to America was the tradition and the knowledge of methods of government. Government is after all a practical matter, a certain way of getting certain things done; and it was government in this sense, not the temporary conflicts concerning the administration of it, that was perpetuated in America. It was the practical capacity to govern, and not the mere negative love of liberty, that was the most valuable and characteristic inheritance that the American colonists received from their mother-country; and it was this that most clearly differentiated them from French colonists to the north and Spanish colonists to the south.

Again, it is to be noted that our political and constitutional knowledge is much clearer concerning central than concerning local

government. King, Parliament, ministers, and the great law-courts are much more familiar to us than the lords-lieutenants, sheriffs, and justices-of-the-peace of counties; than the vestries, constables, and churchwardens of parishes; than cities and boroughs with their maze of officials and functions. For the uses of American history this relative degree of familiarity with central and local institutions should be exactly reversed. Local government in the colonies was for a long time much more important than central. It was on their stock of knowledge of methods of doing neighborhood work that the early settlers had to draw for immediate use; the demand on their traditions of central government came later and more gradually. It is impossible to understand colonial self-government without understanding English local government. Some of the deficiencies in this part of our knowledge are, it is true, being filled out. Miss Scofield's work on the *Star Chamber* (1900), Mr. Beard's essay on *The Office of Justice of the Peace* (1904), Miss Leonard's study of the local administration of the Poor Law (1900), and doubtless others, are valuable contributions; but much of the best work being done, like Mr. Baldwin's papers on the King's Council, is on earlier periods; the harvest is still abundant, and the laborers few. There is much need of adequate historical investigation and clear description of the normal work of government both central and local under the Tudors and Stuarts.

Turning to religious and ecclesiastical history, some of the same facts are true of it as have been asserted of political history. Sharp as were its struggles, keen as the interest has been in these struggles, most of the study and writing on them has been too narrow. The organization, the personnel, and the activities of the established church of England during this period are almost unknown. I do not know where in all historical literature one can turn for a plain, scholarly, impartial description of the Anglican church during the century after the Reformation. Even the admirable work by Mr. Dexter just published, *The England and Holland of the Pilgrims* (1905), and Mr. Usher's edition of the Minute Book of an Elizabethan Presbytery,¹ take the established church all for granted. Yet this is the background against which the whole picture of the Puritan movement must be drawn. To understand a protest, we must understand what it is against which the protest is made. To obtain a fair idea of the disputes between the Anglican and the Puritan, we must know what the real condition of the former was; what he was undertaking to do, and how well or ill he was doing it. Much

¹ Royal Historical Society Publications, London, 1905.

of the writing on this period and aspect of history has been only too interested and too narrow. It has been the work of apologists for various sects. It is quite time that calm, trained historical students should throw light into its dark corners also.

The intellectual interests of the period of the effulgence of Elizabethan literature have naturally been so carefully studied and so fully described by scholars in that field that we may safely leave it to their labors. It is, however, only fair to say that we cannot look for much light from these scholars on any other aspect of the period than their own specialty. Notwithstanding all the painstaking industry and the trained judgment of the historians of literature, even the best of them seem to be satisfied with a very vague and fragmentary picture of the society in the midst of which the writers they study lived. Their work is often like one of those renaissance portraits in which every detail of the man represented is admirably portrayed, but the background is a confused mass of buildings, gardens, figures, and landscape. What we still need is to make the surroundings also clear.

For economic conditions the ground has been broken, but scarcely more than broken. Cunningham's great work, especially in its new edition, throws some light upon it. Miss Leonard's recent study of "The Inclosure of Common Fields in the Seventeenth Century"¹ is important. A few other monographs come temptingly near the period, but just fail to deal with it. Some work has been done on the commercial companies whose history lies so close to that of our earliest settlements; but progress in that direction is painfully slow. Others are known to be making a more thorough study of the internal economic conditions of England than has been made before; but their work has not yet been published, and they will be the first to bear out the statement that much is waiting to be done in this aspect also of English history during the late Tudor and early Stuart periods.

The existence or non-existence of historical works on the subjects indicated is, naturally, closely connected with the availability of the sources for them. Do sources exist from which such historical narratives or descriptions can be drawn? Are they printed? If not, are they easily accessible in manuscript form? No categorical answer to the last two of these questions can of course be given, but some statement can be made of the form and availability of the principal sources, and of the direction in which they are in process of being made more accessible. It does not need to be pointed out

¹ *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, N. S., XIX. 101-146.

here that any historical work worth doing involves going to actual, original, contemporary documents. But many of these are easily accessible, being already printed in extenso. Such are the statutes, proceedings of Parliament, famous trials, statements of religious principles, the more conspicuous state papers, and a great body of foreign and domestic correspondence. Others, like the *Acts of the Privy Council*, are being printed more or less rapidly by the English government.

Few persons realize what a large body of records exists, published in full form, in the series of transactions or periodicals published by various societies; and these are constantly being added to. Historical work in England is poorly organized to the last degree, and no known force except chance decides what is going to appear in any one of the twenty or more uncorrelated forms of publication. Bibliographies for this period do not exist, and it is often almost as hard to find what documents have appeared as to find what are going to appear—but nevertheless appear they do, and in considerable numbers. Far behind Germany, France, Italy, and the United States in systematic historical production as England certainly is; with her universities devoted principally to secondary study, and her historical investigators working in unsupported loneliness, even when they are not losing much good energy in personal controversies; nevertheless the fact remains that through the government, through various societies, and through other agencies a great amount and variety of historical material is constantly being made accessible to all historical students. The immoral custom of issuing but a small and limited number of copies of certain works is more widespread in England than in other countries, as in the instance where Oxford University some years ago issued some very important facsimile maps in an edition of only fifty copies; but this seldom applies to documents of any great value or interest—to real students. I repeat that the possibilities of work from existing printed material are very great. A thesis has recently been issued from one of our universities which involves the use of more material concerning the later English craft-gilds than all the other existing works on the subject, English and American, together; and all this material was found in one American university library. The history of local political institutions, those of the county, hundred, and parish, could probably be quite sufficiently studied from material already in print. Local manuscript records are in very bad shape. Ill-written in the first place, subsequently they have been neglected or scattered or forgotten or destroyed. There has never until lately been any pres-

sure from above to require local authorities to keep their records in order, and when the county councils recently took the matter up to the extent of requiring parish officials to provide a tin box for their records, they met an almost ludicrous amount of resistance. Nevertheless the total bulk of local records has been so great as to leave still, after all losses, an immense residuum. For the study of local institutions these county and parish records are indispensable; for the knowledge of real social conditions they are almost equally important, for here more than anywhere else we read the plain, unquestionable records of what people actually did under actual, ordinary circumstances. It is here that we find the true corrective to "drum and trumpet history"—real people living their lives, quite unaware of the lurid story of them which later writers of romance might tell. How could a plain churchwarden, attending a parish meeting where money gained from the Hock-Tuesday play was brought in and appropriated to repairs on the church-steeple; where the men who had rung the bells to welcome King James, as he passed through from Edinburgh to London to take his new crown, came to get their fees; where the constable reported how many vagabonds he had whipped and turned over to the next parish; where a new parish mole-catcher was appointed; and where ten pounds of the parish funds was loaned out to apprentice a boy to a neighboring tradesman—how could this churchwarden who has left us his minutes of the meeting be supposed to know that England was at that very time torn to shreds by quarrels between Anglican and Puritan, and that all usual employments were suspended while Parliament and the king were settling their disputes as to the extent of the prerogative?

The value of this class of records has lately come to be recognized more and more, and in the usual English way a new society has been formed to provide for the printing of such material; but its systematic publication will involve much difficulty and a long time. In the meantime there is a great body of local records already in print, as in the case of the records of broader interest already referred to. They are printed as appendixes or foot-notes in various works of local history, and in local periodicals. This material is hard to gather and hard to co-ordinate. There are no bibliographical guides, or almost none. Local histories are always questionable and generally inferior in scholarly qualities. Nevertheless such material is well worth collecting and utilizing. But little has been done or is likely to be done in this direction in England. It is much to be desired that the Library of Congress, the Carnegie Institution, the American Historical Association, some state historical society, or

some well-equipped university or public library should take up the task of collecting, listing, and critically valuing the books and periodicals on English local history which contain in them bona-fide English local records referring to the period of American settlement.

Turning from documents published in full to printed abstracts of manuscripts, we are immediately brought face to face with the publications of the Public Record Office in London. The splendid body of national records preserved there, more voluminous, more continuous, more accessible, probably, than those of any other European nation, are for the most part now classified by subject and date. The authorities have been engaged for many years in printing calendars or analytical lists of certain classes of these papers in such a degree of fullness as will often preclude the necessity of the student's seeing the manuscript itself. These are the well-known *Calendars of State Papers*, of which there are now about three hundred volumes in print.

Unfortunately for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some other periods have been recently receiving a disproportionately large share of attention. About four volumes for the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are being published to every one for the sixteenth and seventeenth. Curiously enough, there are at present many more people desirous of studying the patent-rolls and close rolls of the fourteenth century than the records of later periods, and it is they whom the Keeper of the Records is trying to satisfy. This must be amended by pressure from this side of the sea. The authorities of the Record Office, like all other authorities, are amenable to pressure; and if there is a steady, strong demand they will eventually recognize that American and English students want access to the papers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and turn their attention toward satisfying them. However, both the Domestic papers and the Colonial records are already calendared well down beyond the dates chosen for this paper; and Foreign, Admiralty, Treasury, and other classes of papers are for our purpose less important. These printed calendars can be found in every large library in America and Europe, and an astonishingly large amount of useful investigation can be made from them alone, or from them in conjunction with other printed documents.

Nevertheless, the desire to do thorough and detailed work will in most cases sooner or later draw the investigator to London and make him for a while what is technically called a "searcher" in the Record Office. It is no hard fate. The conditions of study there are pleasant, the rules few and reasonable, the officials courteous and

helpful. If handwriting is illegible and the reading of manuscripts slow work, it is in most cases made as light as possible by their careful preparation and their accessibility. Some of the manuscripts, it is true, are still crumpled, stained, dusty, and strung like fish on a string, but those yet in this raw state are few and are being steadily reduced in number. The officials are usually ready to put those of any special bundle quickly in order. The dust of ages is sometimes not metaphorical—but wash-stands are handy. Most explorers like to meet an occasional bit of jungle or desert, if only to give variety to the journey, and something to boast about afterward. Plans are being discussed for the organization of American historical work in London which will make it more pleasant and more profitable. In the study or exploitation of any such mass of material as that deposited in the Record Office and the British Museum there is always a plenteous harvest of new information to be garnered. The manuscript records of any great national collection contain just as much unknown material and of quite as much human interest as do the graves and mounds of Egypt or Babylonia, and there is much of the same fascination in the work of excavating it.

This being the condition of the sources, it is evident that there is no lack of material for study of the period 1580 to 1660. This paper is intended, then, simply to plead for a more minute, careful, methodical, scholarly study of English conditions and English events at the time of the first American migration, and to point out the practicability of such an investigation. What is needed is not so much a study of the great men of the period as of the typical men; not so much an account of the casual occurrences of the time as of its wide-spread institutions; not so much a narrative of the temporary conflicts of the English people as of their normal development. There is room for many laborers. The young historian, looking for work worthy of his enthusiasm; the worried professor, at a loss where to advise his young charge to go in search of a thesis-subject; the old, hardened investigator, looking for some new world to conquer; the student of American colonial history who follows his subject backward till it brings him tantalizingly to the very edge of the Atlantic—all these may find occupation and interest and enlightenment for themselves and for others in the field of investigation here pointed out.

And it is no uninteresting or repellent task. It takes us back, wandering children that we are, to our mother-country; it places us in the midst of the life, the variety, the excitement of Elizabethan and early Stuart England; in the study of local institutions, indeed

in the study of almost any of the phases of the time, we are brought into contact with the rural and civic gentry of England, that great homogeneous, patriotic, and gifted body which was the real governing class of England, and from whose ranks came so many of the leaders at court and in Parliament, on land and at sea, in England and in America; it makes us onlookers at one scene in the development of English history, that longest, most continuous, and most momentous historical drama that the world has yet known.

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